



Medal

New decoration recognizes Airmen for engaging the enemy

for

Mettle



by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo

by Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Donna Parry

A gunship navigator, a truck driver, an aero-evacuation technician, an aerial gunner, a pararescueman and an A-10 Thunderbolt II pilot — these Airmen many not have much in common, except for one thing. They've all engaged in air or ground combat — traded fire — with the enemy. And, they were the first Airmen to receive the new Air Force Combat Action Medal.

During a mid-June ceremony in Arlington, Va., Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley awarded the six medals he said are a visual reminder that combat is a fundamental part of being an Airman.

"As we thought about the 700,000 (total force) Airmen out there today who epitomize the warrior ethos while in combat on the ground or in the air, we began to think through this notion of a combat action ribbon that is part of our culture and our heritage," the general said.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Airmen engaging hostile forces during the performance of their duties. Many of the Airmen were "outside the wire" doing nontraditional jobs when they came under fire.

The six Airmen received their combat action medals in the shadow of the U.S. Air Force Memorial, which overlooks Arlington National Cemetery and the Pentagon. It was a fitting setting. It is a memorial to the more than 56,600 Airmen who died in battle defending America and to those still fighting for their country. It's a testament to Airmen's warrior spirit, past and present.

On the following pages the medal recipients recount, in their own words, the actions for which they received their medal. The units listed are those they served in when in combat.

by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo

The 16th Special Operations Squadron went to Afghanistan shortly after 9-11. I'm from New York, so it was especially significant. It was significant for everybody.

So we deployed, and immediately tasked to support the ground forces, because that's what the gunship does.

In this instance, we were supporting ground units by Kandahar (Afghanistan) and they were in some firefights. So we were able to put suppressive fire down on the enemy and protect our guys and make sure they had a good night's sleep.

During the whole time, I was in the moment. We train for that. The crew was so professional in getting the job done. When we got back home safely, we reflected on what had transpired.

I'm just proud to represent all the gunship community and all the folks who are going to receive this medal in the future. I'm fortunate enough to be one of the firsts. I'm blessed.

I just can't give enough thanks to the folks who are still over there doing the job.

THEN 1ST LT. (NOW CAPT.) ALLISON BLACK
AC-130H GUNSHIP NAVIGATOR
1ST SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP, HURLBURT FIELD, FLA.
DATE OF EVENT: DEC 4, 2001



THEN TECH. (NOW MASTER) SGT. BYRON ALLEN
MH-53 PAVE LOW AERIAL GUNNER
1ST SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP, HURLBURT FIELD, FLA.
DATE OF EVENT: APRIL 12, 2004

We had two Pave Lows making a few stops and doing a few things over the evening. During our first stop in Falusia (Iraq) we picked up remains for repatriation back home.

The landing zone already had some helicopters parked on it, so we turned around and were circling and waiting for the LZ to clear so we could land. On about our second circle, the lead helicopter took an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) right to the nose. It happened really fast and lit up the sky for a second.

Our first reaction was, "What happened?" I shot into a group of 25 (enemy combatants) on the initial contact when they hit the lead helicopter.



The first helicopter had pitched its nose up high on impact, so we scooted to our right and tried to keep from hitting it in midair. We did avoid hitting it, but unfortunately (the enemy) was still shooting at us with RPGs and small arms. So we did evasive maneuvers and got out of the way of any further danger. But, unfortunately, we lost track of the lead helicopter while we avoided getting hit.

We looked for a few minutes and we started debating about what to do. It was very, very dark and we were using NVGs (night vision goggles). We thought maybe we should set down out of harm's way and try to make radio contact. But about that same time I happened to look out the back, because I'm facing backward as the tail gunner, and I could see them (the lead helicopter) pass under us. So I called it out over the intercom and they came around hard left and we landed about 100 feet away from them.

When we landed, we sent out some Army special forces that were on board and they got all nine of the guys back (from the downed helicopter). We got them on board and took off back to Baghdad. Immediately upon take-off the enemy began shooting at us.

Again, I fired about 25 more rounds into where the fire came from. They stopped long enough for us to get our injured back to Baghdad. We off-loaded and everybody lived. We had one guy lose an eye, and three guys earned Purple Hearts.



STAFF SGT. DANIEL PAXTON
AERO-EVACUATION TECHNICIAN
43RD AEROMEDICAL EVACUATION SQUADRON,
POPE AIR FORCE BASE, N.C.
DATE OF EVENT: MARCH 28, 2003



As we were convoying with the Marine Corps traveling through Iraq, we were setting up a mobile air medical staging facility so we could receive incoming patients and then air evacuate them so they could receive more care.

So, our job was to travel with the Marine Corps, set up these staging facilities, and move on. As we were traveling, we had quite a few engagements with the enemy. The worst was in a small town where we had one Marine casualty and a couple of wounded people as well. We were in a somewhat lengthy firefight there and actually had to break contact and go back through the town at night. That was when they

(insurgents) took pot shots at us and we returned fire. I felt safe being in a Marine convoy, though, because they're all about the warrior stuff. They were squared away with their weaponry. We came into contact no less than five or six times throughout the convoy. The convoy lasted 18 hours. It was a long trip.

MAJ. STEVEN RASPERT
A-10 THUNDERBOLT II PILOT, 354TH FIGHTER SQUADRON,
DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, ARIZ.
DATE OF EVENT: JAN. 8, 2006

I was a flight leader of a flight of A-10s deployed out of Bagram (Air Base, Afghanistan). That day, we were tasked to support a joint Afghan-Army operation. About halfway through the mission, we received information we were re-tasked to provide support to a convoy that had been ambushed.

My wingman and I arrived in the target area and picked up the convoy of vehicles that was isolated in the middle of a wash. You could hear the



tension in the voice of the JTAC (joint terminal attack controller). He wanted to get fire down on a target.

Earlier that day, they had been ambushed and had received an IED (improvised explosive device) strike that had wounded a person. We did two passes with the 30 mm (seven-barrel Gatling gun). The JTAC, who was happy with the strikes, was able to continue the convoy.

We dropped down and escorted them for the next 45 minutes and let the enemy know we were there. It was a show of presence. There was one choke point they were nervous about, so we escorted them through that until the next flight of A-10s showed up. Then, we went home after the five-and-a-half hour sortie. The adrenalin was going the whole time. It was incredible.



Beneath the spires of the U.S. Air Force Memorial in Arlington, Va., Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley awarded six Airmen the new Air Force Combat Action Medal. The decoration is the first of its kind for the Air Force. Airmen who have been directly in harm's way, engaging enemy forces, are eligible to receive it.

SENIOR MASTER SGT. RAMON COLON-LOPEZ
PARARESCUEMAN
AIR FORCE PARARESCUE/COMBAT RESCUE OFFICER SCHOOL
KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, N.M.
DATE OF EVENT: MARCH 11, 2004



Once we confirmed our target, we launched the mission. As soon as we approached a village, the bad guys in the village started firing on the lead helicopter, which my team and I were in.

We landed in a dry riverbed and started hearing a lot of pings on the aircraft. As soon as we hit the ground, the flight engineer told us to "Get out, get out, get out!" That was when we saw the muzzle flashes coming at us. The pings we heard weren't rocks hitting the helicopter, but bullets. So, we immediately got out and couldn't find any cover. We were in the middle of a dry river bed. We found the biggest rocks we could to get behind for cover and started engaging and chasing away the enemy. We had about

three other helicopters coming in after us, so we started suppressing the threat for them. (The enemy) started retreating, but still engaged us. We ended up proceeding with the assault and chased those guys out. We successfully continued into the village to get who we came for, a bad guy who was pushing a lot of drugs to fund terrorism. He was also known to have weapons stashed there. Two of the enemy ended up getting killed and we apprehended 10 others, including the drug kingpin's brother. A few Americans got injured, but nobody was killed.

Before a flag-bearing color guard, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley salutes Senior Master Sgt. Ramon Colon-Lopez after presenting him the Air Force Combat Action Medal.



Staff Sgt. Madelyn Waychoff

MASTER SGT. CHARLIE PETERSON
VEHICLE OPERATOR
927TH LOGISTICS READINESS SQUADRON
SELFRIDGE AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE, MICH.
DATE OF EVENT: JULY 28, 2004



Typically, we're the guys who drive the blue bus on the flightline. This time, we got assigned to work for the Army. My job was as platoon leader and convoy commander. We provided security for civilian drivers along routes where they were having problems.

On July 28, my convoy was hit with an IED. It was evening, as I remember, and it was the hottest time of the year, so we were going on evening missions. We got hit and it just happened to be my vehicle that got hit with an IED. After the smoke died down and I came out, we did our normal reporting procedures. A lot of our communications were blown out. So, we used whatever resources we had.

It just so happened that we were close to a base, about a mile or two, and they heard the explosion. Army quick-reaction forces responded to the scene. I looked up and saw all my guys had secured the perimeter. It was a good feeling to know that they didn't even skip a beat. They were doing exactly what they were trained to do, ready to mow down anything that moved.

I had wounds on my face and left forearm. The guy next to me sustained hearing damage and a little shrapnel. The people who were wounded jumped into two Humvees and we went to the nearby base, where they cleaned us up and sent us back to home station, where we were looked at by physicians. Afterwards, I really wanted to get my hands around somebody's neck. 🦅

A medal is born

The Air Force Combat Action Medal wasn't so much made, as it was born.

Its design came from a reading assignment about an Air Force hero. It took shape in the mind of a colonel's wife. An idea turned into reality using weaving machinery that had to be specially made, using a diagonal design that had never been used for a U.S. medal.

In the end, the Air Force Combat Action Medal turned out to be one of the most unique of its kind in America.

It all started when Air Force Chief of Staff T. Michael Moseley asked all newly selected brigadier generals and senior executive service civilians to read the book "A Question of Loyalty" by Douglas Waller. The book chronicles the famous court martial of Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell, an early advocate of airpower.

Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel Lt. Gen. Roger Brady read the book. He was struck by the personal insignia General Mitchell had painted on the aircraft he flew during the World War I allied offensive against Germany in 1918 over Saint-Mihiel, France. General Mitchell had planned and led nearly 1,500 allied aircraft in that offensive, which was the first time in history that airpower was employed based on a broad, strategic plan.

General Brady suggested to General Moseley that a medal based on Billy Mitchell's logo might be appropriate to capture the spirit of the Air Force advocate and recognize the participation of Airmen in combat op-

photo illustration by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo and Tech. Sgt. Larry Simmons



erations. General Moseley agreed. An idea was born.

Col. Mike Gamble, who works for Air Force manpower and personnel, took General Brady's rough sketch and gave it to his wife, Susan. She's a professional artist and master designer for the U.S. Mint. The jump from designing coins to crafting a medal wasn't a big one for her.

"I wanted to keep a World War I feel to the medal while also updating the design," she said.

She made three medal prototypes. General Moseley picked the one that had a ribbon sporting bold orange and yellow diagonal stripes, a first in U.S. medal design. The ribbon stands out in a rack of other Air Force ribbons. All Air Force ribbons are aligned vertically.

"You can see the diagonal stripe in foreign decorations, but this is the first time in a U.S. military decoration," said Charles Mungo, from the Institute of Heraldry at Fort Belvoir, Va.

The institute designs and develops insignia, flags, decorations and agency seals for the armed forces, federal government agencies and the Executive Branch. When they got Mrs. Gamble's prototype, institute designers created blueprints for two manufacturers, one for the ribbon and one for the medal.

The diagonal stripe is so rare the institute had difficulty finding a company that could loom the ribbon. There were no American companies with the equipment needed to weave a diagonal stripe. But John Balducci, an Air Force civilian at the Air Staff responsible for awards and decorations, found a company willing to order the special equipment needed to meet the requirement that the medal and ribbon be "Made in America."

The medal also has unique piercings, or openings, punched around its eagle and wreath. This, too, required specific tools and alignment for the precision needed.

"This is one of the more bold designs for a military medal that has been produced in quite some time," Mr. Mugno said. "It's one of the greatest medals ever designed."

Airmen have received the medal well, especially by the first six Airmen to receive it.

"I'm glad our Airmen are able to distinguish themselves as having seen real combat and not just deploying and staying behind the fence, eating meals and going to bed every night," said medal recipient Senior Master Sgt. Ramon Colon-Lopez. [See "Medals for combat," Page 30]

"It's important because we're recognized as a total force," said Master Sgt. Charlie Peterson, the first reservist to receive the medal. "To get recognized the same as a person on active duty tells me that we're a total force."

The two sergeants donated their medals to the U.S. Air Force Enlisted Heritage Hall at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala. They want to keep Air Force history alive, in the same spirit of those who proposed the medal.

— Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.